

Lalgarh-People's Power

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An uprising is sweeping the jangal mahal of West Bengal, almost all the tribes inhabiting the forests and their outliers in the districts of Paschim Medinipur and Bankura have arisen against rampant police oppression in the name of fighting Maoists.

The heart of the uprising is in the Lalgarh and Belpahari blocks with a total population between a quarter of a million and a third. The total tribal population of 160 thousand is up in arms. Nobody has seen a people's uprising on this scale since the anti-colonial movements in the nineteen forties.

Trees have been felled and roads cut to build barricades. Lalgarh (the police oppression here on women triggered the discontent simmering over indiscriminate arrests and physical torture) is completely barricaded. While the CPI(M) has swept into attacks on the people demonstrating outside the forests, the left is mostly silent apart from some general statements. Even the usually vocal sections of civil society have shown a response much below the level expected for the case of such an unprecedented upheaval. This is perhaps an unfortunate response to the known influence of the Maoists in Lalgarh and some other parts of the jangal mahal, although the Maoists themselves have up to now made no overt attempt to dictate to what is still definitely a people's movement from the grassroots up.

The blocks of Binpur I and II (Lalgarh and Belpahari) have a SC+ST population of 54.6% and they are 57.5% of the total. For all of West Bengal, the proportion is half of this, 28.5%. The blocks are inhabited by many poor people, the proportion of BPL families are 40% and 37% respectively, the all-West Bengal value for this index being 27%. The figures explain why the movement is so persistent and courageous, and why it could start as a movement mainly of the Santal, and go on to acquire a base among all the *jana-jati* (the main committee has a Mahato as President and a Santal as the General Secretary). However, the movement must take special care to encompass the poor *non-janajati 'diku'*, how will it fight the state without the active participation of more than 40% of the people? The Jhargram (town) municipal success of the CPI(M) is a pointer in this respect.

Proportionately more people are workers here in these blocks. Workers are 49% of the population in Belpahari but only 37% in all of West Bengal.

The proportion of cultivated area to geographical area is 58% in Lalgarh, 5.5 percentage points behind the West Bengal average of 63.5%. The proportion of cultivators and agricultural labourers among all workers is 44% in West Bengal and 32% in Belpahari. The figures suggest that agricultural activity is less than average here. This is supported by a marked decrease in the proportion of agricultural labourers to cultivators—1.3 (that is almost 1½ times) in all-West Bengal, and 0.76 (that is a ¾ part) in Belpahari. There being little industry in Belpahari it means that many workers are involved in irregular and casual work, without security and continuity. Small and marginal farmers constitute 75% of all households in Lalgarh and 57% in Belpahari, the latter, however, being 92% of all cultivators and agricultural labourers (in all-West Bengal small and marginal farmers are 91.4% of all farmers).

The picture is that of a poor, industrious people, with a majority of tribal communities, dependent on a not too flourishing small peasant agriculture and casual employment.

The people's movement in Lalgarh raises a number of pertinent points.

—1. The blockade emphasises the point that the poverty alleviation programmes are a huge hoax in such interior villages inhabited by the poor, because it is clear that the great majority of people in Lalgarh do not care if communications with the government are cut off, rather they rest in peace. They have said so explicitly. Ration cards are hard to get by, foodstuff allotted as rations is sold off and the holder is informed that there is no material to be distributed. Everyone has collected a job card for the 100 days' work for all, under the NREGS, but till now, in the current year, only 12 days work has been organised, on an average.

No doubt, they are definitely hostile to "Development", because, as they say, the first thing that will happen is that they would be displaced and forest land cleared for establishing the factories. On the contrary, they want to preserve the forest and the water from the depredations of development so that they can continue with their way of life and their definitive culture.

Economists can call them physiocrats or Luddites or plain bucolic idiots. But they are going to protect their forests, lands and water, displaying today their resolve symbolically with *tangi* and *teer-karh*.

Politicians have two choices. They can try to force their medicine of jobless industrialisation down the unwilling throats—but Singur and Nandigram have taken the blinkers off their eyes, all over India they will resist it. The other choice is to confer with them and learn through dialogue what they mean by development and how one can genuinely help them bring it about themselves, a development for the people, by the people. The party which does this (without issuing commands to follow this or that dictat) will surely win their hearts.

—2. For the people to organise their own development they need power. The movement in Lalgarh is also an assertion of local political power with the village committee as its organ (5+5 representation for men and women). As yet, it is not a bid for total power, it is not asking the state to abdicate. It is a bid for partial power, demanding consultative rights over law and order implementation: the police must take their permission. Once again the state can recognise the reality of their power and agree to this curtailment of its central authority (which is not really a curtailment but a more even distribution, after all the people are sovereign!), or it can force a confrontation which will teach the people to think of total power as the only guarantee of peace. What the people have tasted in Lalgarh is the reality of their power, and it speaks volumes for their wisdom that they have desisted from testing it in confrontation provoked from their side. But they will never forget this power and if it is forcibly taken away from them they will strive not only to regain it but expand it to the utmost. Once again the party which recognises and respects (without usurping) their power will win their minds.

There are two possible scenarios which can emerge.

In one, the state agrees to a reallocation of local power with a recognition of the village committee as a local power centre. The people use the committees to fight for their rights and interests, on the one hand, within the panchayets (especially within reactivated Gram Sansads and Gram Panchayets), extracting from the state 100 days work for all to start with, the work being productive and locally necessary for agriculture, (local) industry or everyday life, and, on the other hand, against predatory "development" and oppression by the organs of state power, thereby amplifying the scope and power of local autonomy in continual struggle with the state.

In the other scenario, the state refuses political space to the people's committees and resorts to violent repression. The people will fight back and one might see an escalation to helicopters and army action, backed by "salwa judum" gangs comprising activists of the major ruling party, leading in all possibility, given the presence of Maoists, to guerrilla resistance on the part of the people. Such a conflagration will not remain localised and the plains of Bengal will not be insulated from happenings inside the forests of jangal mahal. Some might argue that the first scenario will also end in the same fashion. In fact, which scenario rules and with what consequence is entirely dependent on the flexibility of the state's response to the just movement of the people.

In the mean-time the left and civil society must make up their minds as to whether they want to become irrelevant to the progress of this great people's movement. □□□

[Source:<http://sanhati.com/front-page/1083/>]